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Margaret Bruchac

University of Pennsylvania, mbruchac@sas.upenn.edu

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Abstract

The area around Keene, New Hampshire was originally known to the Abenaki Indian people as Ashuelot. Although the name is now best known as a river, it originally translated to "land between place," referring to the flat land between the surrounding mountains, criss-crossed with trails that lead to other familiar places.

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Abenakis at Ashuelot: the Sadoques Family and Keene

by Marge Bruchac

The area around Keene, New Hampshire was originally known to the Abenaki Indian people as *Ashuelot*. Although the name is now best known as a river, it originally translated to “land between place,” referring to the flat land between the surrounding mountains, criss-crossed with trails that lead to other familiar places.

Popular histories of Abenaki Indians in New Hampshire typically focus on events from the long-distant past. Many town historical societies, and many private collectors, hold assemblages of Native American Indian artifacts and memories that include: lithic implements created by long-dead, unknown people; tidbits of local Indian folklore; placenames with forgotten meanings; and stories of violent encounters with Abenaki warriors during the French and Indian Wars.

Very few memories of Abenaki people during the 19th century have been preserved in New Hampshire’s town histories, leading many people to imagine that the Indians mostly disappeared. When white New Englanders encountered Native people traveling, selling baskets, or practicing traditional medicine, they often regarded them with suspicion:

Strange how demoralizing the contact of civilization with that of savage life... The lofty bearing and noble demeanor of the primitive Indians are gone, and nothing is left but the abject and debased exterior of the red man...They employ themselves in manufacturing baskets...Altogether considered, they are merely a wretched remnant of a race of noble and proud Red men, who once tenanted this fair valley, and whose stealthy tread and uplifted tomohawk, carried death to hearts terrified by their appalling war-cry (Northampton Courier, Northampton, MA, Vol. IX, No. 25, June 6 1838, p. 3).

This talk aims to shed some light on this supposed “dark age” in New Hampshire’s history, by revealing how, and why, Abenaki people could literally “hide in plain sight.” Historians have only recently begun exposing the degree to which white town historians adopted stereotypical, racialized narratives of “vanishing Indians” that distorted the historical record. Some people imagine that many of the Abenakis in New Hampshire today are imports from Maine or Canada, but the surviving primary documents and oral traditions have a far more complex story to tell. This talk uses some of those sources to offer glimpses into the far-reaching connections traced by the members of just one extended Abenaki family across central New England, New York state, and Canada, before settling in Keene in the 1880s.

Oral traditions and colonial records suggest that the family name traces back to 1666, when a deed for the Quaboag region of Massachusetts, now Brookfield, was

signed by a man named *Shattoockquis*, a Quaboag/Pocumtuck sachem. In the 1670s, his entire tribal family band moved to Schaghticoke, in western New York state. Native surnames endured frequent misspellings through the vagaries of English and French pronunciation. In New York, the family name shifted to *Sadochques*. When the family moved north to Saint Francis/Odanak in Canada, it shifted again, to *Mesadoques*, who signed his name with a fox totem on French documents. By the early 19th century, the name had evolved into *Mesatogwes* and *M'Sadoques*, yet two more variant spellings, before becoming, in Keene, *Sadoques*.

On first hearing the Keene Abenaki oral tradition recounted, one might think the arrival of the Sadoques family was almost accidental. Mali Mason Keating recalled an incident around 1886, when Israel M'Sadoques and Mary Watso M'Sadoques were camped on the Connecticut River at Bellows Falls in Vermont:

*...when they camped there, two men came. And they had seen my grandmother and she was very beautiful. They said to my grandfather. "You bring out your woman? We want your woman." And my grandfather went in and got his flintlock, and came out and said, "You're gonna get a ball in the teeth if you don't leave."...So while they were there, a man came along in a wagon and he said, "What are you people doing here?" And they said, "Well, we're trying to decide where we can go that will be safe, where we can raise our family..." So he said, "Well, I live over the hill, in the valley, where Keene, New Hampshire is. And you would like it, it's a very nice town." (Mali Keating, "North American Passage: The 19th –century odyssey of an Abenaki Family" in *Visit'n*, Middlebury, VT: Vermont Folklife Center 2001, volume 7, p. 29)*

The family did move to Keene, and stayed there through the 20th century. They changed the family name from M'Sadoques to Sadoques to make it easier for Americans to pronounce. Israel had hunted and trapped for the Hudson Bay Company, and his wife, Mary Watso, was a master basketmaker.

*Israel
Sadoques
business ad in
the 1899-1900
Keene City
Directory*

ISRAEL SADOQUES,
BASKET MAKER.
Manufactures all kinds of FANCY AND ROUGH BASKETS,
Guaranteed to outlast any others in the market. We also
TAN all kinds of FUR HIDES by our own PROCESS,
Which Leaves them Soft, Flexible and Insect Proof.
ORDERS SOLICITED.
Residence, 454 Elm Street, KEENE, N. H. P. O. BOX 411.

After they had moved to Keene, Israel started a tannery, and also furnished ash splints for the Keene Chair Company. His ash-splint and basketry advertisements in the Keene city registry used a standard woodcut of a fox that, on first glance,

simply adds some outdoor flavor. But that symbol of a fox could also be a totem animal, evoking the signature of *Shattoockquis* found on the Brookfield deed.

In Keene, the Sadoques daughters – now known to present generations as the “Aunts” – became repositories of the family’s oral histories. One daughter ran a milliners’ shop on Main Street. One married a photographer. One became an Episcopalian nun. One became a registered nurse. One daughter, Elizabeth Sadoques, was invited to Deerfield, Massachusetts in 1922 to offer a historical talk on the family history. She recounted her family’s frequent visits to Deerfield and to Northampton, Massachusetts, where, in 1838, her ancestors had been described so disdainfully, and so inaccurately, as “*a wretched remnant of a race of noble and proud Red men*” by a reporter from the *Northampton Courier*.

The members of this Abenaki family, like so many others, employed a myriad of strategies to adapt and survive after the arrival of Europeans. For generations, they drew on their old familiarity with the resources found in the broad range of territory across central and northern New England. For generations, their presence, and their deep attachment to *Ndakinna*, meaning “our homeland,” was poorly understood by most white Americans. Even the rough translation of the Sadoques family name, “big-river person,” helps to explain their constant return to rivers where Native people had long lived. Whether as large as the Connecticut, or as small as the Ashuelot, these rivers always felt like home.

***Program at the Historical Society of Cheshire County
September 25, 2003:***

Marge Bruchac, Abenaki Indian, teacher, historical consultant, and performer, and Lynn Keating Murphy, Abenaki Indian, master educator, and granddaughter of Elizabeth Sadoques of Keene, will shed some light on this supposed "dark age" in New Hampshire's history at our membership meeting on Monday September 25th starting at 7:30 p.m. Their talk will reveal how, and why, Abenaki people could literally "hide in plain sight." Historians have only recently begun exposing the degree to which white town historians adopted stereotypical, racialized narratives of "vanishing Indians" that distorted the historical record. Some people imagine that many of the Abenakis in New Hampshire today are imports from Maine or Canada. Surviving documents and oral traditions have a far more complex story to tell, as seen by tracing just one extended Abenaki family in Keene.